

VZCZCXRO6142
OO RUEHBZ RUEH DU RUEHJO RUEHMR RUEHRN
DE RUEHAN #1351/01 3390505
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 050505Z DEC 06
FM AMEMBASSY ANTANANARIVO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3952
INFO RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0752
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ANTANANARIVO 001351

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DEPT FOR AF/E, AF/FO, INR/AA, AND DRL
PARIS FOR D'ELIA

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [EAID](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [MA](#)
SUBJECT: ELECTION DAY CALM, PRESIDENT IN THE LEAD

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REFTEL: ANTANANARIVO 1348 AND PREVIOUS

11. (U) SUMMARY: A calm and relatively orderly presidential election December 3 was marred by just one incident of ballot tampering in the south. Turnout appears to have been strong and very preliminary results have President Marc Ravalomanana in the lead, with over 50 percent of the vote, despite strong regional results for Roland Ratsiraka and Jean Lahiniriko. According to Embassy observers, most polling station officials distinguished themselves despite complex voting rules, imperfect electoral lists, and inadequate training. All attention now focuses on vote tabulation -- it could be three weeks or more before the High Constitutional Court certifies official results. END SUMMARY.

CALM PREVAILS DECEMBER 3

12. (SBU) Madagascar exhaled late December 3 when a calm election day wound down and ballot counting began. Despite heavy afternoon rain in Antananarivo and several coastal cities, participation appears to have been between 55 and 65 percent of registered voters. Preliminary results have President Ravalomanana in a comfortable lead with nearly 60 percent of votes counted, but the early returns are weighted to Ravalomanana's urban strongholds, making it still too soon to assure the 50 percent he needs to avoid a second round run-off. Roland Ratsiraka, nephew of the last President, made a strong showing in his home province of Tamatave and in Diego Suarez, while former Assembly Speaker Jean Lahiniriko did well in his native Tulear. Herizo Razafimhaleo, who appeared to be the lead challenger at the end of the campaign, appears to have had a disappointing showing. The lone woman in the field, Elia Ravelomanantsoa, is running in sixth place, but with less than two percent of the vote. Of the eight candidates tallying behind her, two or three may have literally no votes as their ballots were not present in the polling stations. Because of Madagascar's complicated multiple ballot system, there was variance in the number of candidates whose ballots were available at various polling stations, from 12 down to a low of 18. According to national television reports, four candidates, namely Manandafy Rakotonirina, Monja Roindefo, Gen Razakarimanana, and Philippe Tsiranana did not have ballot papers and voters actually had to choose between ten candidates.

Tulear Incident An Exception

13. (U) Of more than 17,500 polling stations, only one major

incident was reported, in Tulear, where vandals destroyed three ballot boxes. The district office quickly replaced the boxes so the remaining voters could participate. Police are investigating, and eight suspects have been arrested. The Embassy's observer teams in 17 of Madagascar's 22 regions reported no other incidents of vote tampering at the over 400 polling stations they visited in total. News outlets and other observer teams reported similarly calm atmospherics.

¶4. (SBU) In general, observers reported polling station officials to be serious and professional, but also lacking in adequate training. Madagascar's multiple ballot system and complex regulations led to minor inconsistencies in implementation as well as occasional delays. Given significant inaccuracies in voter rolls, special provisions allowed voters to obtain an affidavit or to vote with two witnesses to their identity to avoid being disenfranchised. Despite these provisions, a few polling stations are reported to have turned away as many as ten percent of prospective voters. Post-election complaints about the electoral lists continue to discomfit the European Union for their two million euro investment, but such problems were overwhelmingly procedural; there has been no evidence to date of any systematic effort to disadvantage any particular candidates.

¶5. (SBU) On Monday, December 4, the Ambassador visited the counting center at the Ministry of the Interior, which had been given primary responsibility for the conduct of these elections. Interior Minister Rabemananjara welcomed the Ambassador and showed him the facilities his Ministry was offering for observers, journalists and civil society to witness the process to assure its transparency.

Take A Deep Breath: The Vote Count

¶6. (SBU) Before congratulating anyone too early, Malagasy and international observers alike note election day was equally calm in 2001 before the onset of the governance crisis. The real test comes

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as results slowly trickle in from 17,500 polling stations to 116 district offices, and from there to the High Constitutional Court. During the three weeks it may take for any official declaration, Post expects several candidates and NGOs to publicize their own results. Some opposition candidates will no doubt continue to challenge the electoral process, blame their poor showing on GOM malfeasance, and register numerous official complaints.

¶7. (SBU) The Ambassador will continue to make two simple points with the local media and interlocutors: 1) Our expectation that, if the results warrant a second round run-off, it will be held as required under Malagasy law; and 2) Any candidate who has not prevailed should play a peaceful and constructive role in the aftermath of the election, be it in opposition to the new government or elsewhere in society.

COMMENT: U.S. ROLE HELPFUL

¶8. (SBU) Embassy teams and our international colleagues reported a significant presence of Malagasy NGO observers from the "CNOE" network that was funded and trained by the United States Government through the National Democratic Institute. Their presence on election day and during results tabulation is making an important contribution to the transparency and thus the credibility of this election.

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